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Hospitals' Incinerator Gets Okay

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Montgomery County environmentalists have suffered a serious blow in their attempts to block construction of a federal incinerator at the Walter Reed Hospital Annex in Silver Spring.

In a report Tuesday, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare ruled that the huge incinerator, now under a court-ordered halt in construction, will not pose ecological risks.

The ruling is expected to pack considerable punch with the President's Council on Environmental Quality, which must review it — and public reaction — before work can proceed.

The \$6 million facility is designed to burn medical wastes and trash from Walter Reed, Bethesda Naval Hospital and the National Institutes of Health.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS, including Maryland Sens. Charles Mathias and J. Glenn Beall, fear the incinerator may pose health hazards because of "diseased carcasses" and other wastes the hospitals intend to destroy there.

However, HEW said in a 124-page report that the project will release less than 1 percent of the emissions allowed under stiff federal and state guidelines through 1986.

"There are no known effects which will narrow the range of beneficial uses of the environment or pose risks to the health and safety of the public," the report said.

According to federal officials, construction will actually improve the environment since the outmoded incinerators now being used present more of a health hazard than the new one would.

Work on the incinerator near Brookville Road and Rock Creek Park in Forest Glen was halted by a U.S. District Court judge in January.

THE MORATORIUM placed HEW in a quandary. Even if the President's council now approves the incinerator, it may not be completed by 1973, when new state pollution standards go into effect.

At that time, HEW could be forced to seek exceptions to the standards, or devise a stopgap disposal plan — clearly a second-rate choice, the report said.

According to HEW, adverse impacts of the incinerator will include "a light increase in traffic . . . due to the transport of solid waste" and the burning of 87 tons of waste daily.

Citizens have until April 25 to lodge comments with the President's council.